

Ask Matt: Changing My Friends' Perception of My Gender

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Abstract

[su_mktop] A reader writes: "I recently started college, and I quickly came to the realization that I am transgender. I have been transitioning every way but physically (mentally, socially, etc.), and the process has been enlightening for me. The problem has mainly been with my friends and classmates. "All of my friends have been as [...]"

Article

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A reader writes:

"I recently started college, and I quickly came to the realization that I am transgender. I have been transitioning every way but physically (mentally, socially, etc.), and the process has been enlightening for me. The problem has mainly been with my friends and classmates.

"All of my friends have been as supportive and understanding as they know how. Some friends that I have known for years simply accepted my trans identity as if I came out as gay, telling me they love me, but showing no signs of changing pronouns or their mental perception of my gender. And other friends struggled to remember pronouns and try to shift their thinking from the binary, but it left me feeling discouraged around them and strangers. Additionally, most of my classmates only have my voice and clothing to go on, which convinces them I am a lesbian.

"And I worry that girls who would like me as a guy don't because they think I am a girl, and others won't be able to forget that I'm not the girl they thought I was (which happened last semester). I feel as if I am constantly trying to convince people of my maleness. I can count on one hand the number of people I feel 100% comfortable that they view me as male no matter what.

"I have thought of ways to lightheartedly correct pronouns in a way that convinces people I am just a cis guy with a high voice and soft skin, but constantly being misgendered has crushed my outgoing spirit. I don't want to be "out" in a way that everyone would know I am trans before knowing me, and I don't want to discuss it with every person I meet. I identify proudly as trans, but I don't want to be trans first, I want to be male.

"Some people accept the trans label and he/him pronouns, but I can tell they still relate to me as a lesbian. I don't want my manhood reduced to others trying to remember the right pronouns or something open for discussion and questioning by those who don't know me. How can I find my confidence and voice

in a way that is empowering for me? What advice do you have for pre-/non-physically transitioning guys who want to be seen, and respected, as men?"

This is a tough problem that I think many, or most, trans people experience when/if they are changing name, pronouns, and gender presentation. Transition is an ongoing process, both for you and for those around you. I realize how annoying it is to hear someone tell you to be patient with others when you're the one who is experiencing the pain of being misgendered, but that's what I'm going to tell you - be patient.

I don't know how long it has been since you came out to your friends, but since you say you recently started college and came to this realization, I'm going to assume that it might be a matter of only a few months, and maybe not even that. And honestly, a few months, while it seems like an eternity to you, is really a very short time for your friends to permanently alter their perception of you.

When I transitioned, my friends and coworkers were able to use my new and correct name without slip-ups after a couple of months. The pronoun took much longer, and that, I believe, is because of the way that the brain is wired (and trained) to perceive gender. Even when they started using the right pronoun most of the time, they slipped up here and there. It probably took at least six months, and maybe a year, before there were no slip-ups at all.

Did my friends and coworkers see me as male? I doubt it. Do they see me as male now? I doubt it. I think they see me as trans. I think some of them see me as a guy who used to be a woman. I think some of them probably still see me as a woman who is now a guy (those last two things sound the same, but they're a little bit different). I don't know, because I don't ask them. If I ask them, they will give me the answer that they think I want, anyway, so it really doesn't matter and doesn't get me anywhere.

As far as your friends changing their mental perception of your gender, there is absolutely nothing you can do about that. You can't force them to change a mental perception. It will either change with time or it won't. As the saying goes, "What other people think about you is none of your business."

What you can do is insist on the right pronouns. You say that they have shown no sign of changing pronouns. That's something that you can handle by asking them to use the right pronouns, correcting them when they don't, and eventually not responding to any reference that includes incorrect pronouns. If you think they are making occasional mistakes, that's one thing. If you think they are intentionally using the wrong pronouns and/or refusing to try because it's not that important to them, start looking for some new friends.

With regard to your classmates, they will make determinations based on your name, your voice (both pitch and vocal intonations), your clothing, your body shape, the way you carry yourself, the way you sit, stand, respond, and so on. One of the first determinations our brain makes when we see or meet a person is the gender of that person, and we take in all of those cues to determine that. Once we have that in our head, it's hard to shake. Because of that, your current classmates might not see you as male - particularly if you were "female" at the beginning of the class. But even if you weren't, once they have formed an impression, that impression will likely remain.

Of course, for guys who are medically transitioning, a few months on hormones will usually do the trick. But those who are not, or who are postponing hormones, have to find their own masculinity within

themselves in order to project that to others.

So while you're doing your internal searching and discovery, reinforce that by spending the most time with those friends who recognize and acknowledge your gender. See if you can sign up for classes with some of them. If you have one person in your class who refers to you as "he," other people will notice that. Also, enlist your professors next semester as well. If you contact them prior to the beginning of the semester, they can refer to you with the correct name and pronoun from the beginning.

So I recommend taking a proactive approach with your name and pronouns, making your expectations clear to your friends, correcting them when you feel comfortable doing so, and getting rid of them if they refuse to respect your identity. But as far as them shifting their mental perception of your gender, you can't force that, and you can't do anything about it. For many of them, it will come in time. For others, it will never come. You can decide exactly who you want to keep in your life as time goes on.

As far as finding your voice and your confidence, that will take time as well. Pay attention to what reinforces that confidence and what undermines it. Do more of the things that reinforce it and less of the things that undermine it. Spend more time with the people who reinforce it and less with the people who undermine it. Think more of the thoughts that reinforce it and less of the thoughts that undermine it. Create your own masculinity that you are satisfied with. That takes time. That's why it's a process, and that's why patience is not only an asset, but an absolute necessity.

(And you will find women who will see you as a guy and want to date you as a guy, but again, this will also take time. As your confidence in yourself and your masculinity gets stronger and more stable, women will respond to that and that is who they will see. Remember that the brain is the most important sex organ we have, and confidence is probably the sexiest quality that we possess.)

Readers, what do you think?

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